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The purpose of this paper is to examine unusual characterizations of Guenevere in the Arthurian tradition relating to the tensions between courtly love, chivalry, and Christianity. Texts are drawn from the medieval and Victorian periods and include works from Marie de France, Thomas Chestre, and William Morris.

Part one of the paper involves the intertextual relationships between Marie de France's twelfth century "Lai de Lanval" and Thomas Chestre's fifteenth century retelling. Variances in the characterizations of Guenevere are examined and a pattern begins to emerge. While Marie de France's Guenevere is sympathetic from a courtly point of view, Chestre's rewriting significantly magnifies the character's shortcomings, resulting in a more brutal treatment of the queen in the text. Marie de France's Guenevere, then, appears as a courtly failure while Chestre's is a chivalric failure.

Morris, writing some four hundred years after Chestre, and working from a direct influence by Malory, recasts Guenevere in two poems, "The Defence of Guenevere" and "King Arthur's Tomb". His treatment utilizes a dramatic form with minimal commentary. The two poems further illustrate tensions inherent in Guenevere's life; the former depicting a victory of courtly love over chivalric loyalty, and the latter of Christianity over courtly love. Ultimately, Guenevere chooses Christianity, and through such a choice reclaims her own autonomy and agency.

COURTLY CONTRADICTIONS: A CASE FOR GUENEVERE

By

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INTRODUCTION

The character of Guenevere, wife of Arthur and Queen of Camelot, has endured since the very inception of the Arthurian canon. Beautiful and dangerous, passionate and vengeful, she is rarely attended with more than disdain by medieval authors. Her story is a cautionary tale to illustrate the ramifications of adultery as well as the cost of deceit to one's liege lord.

For in the end, Guenevere's story is not simply that of an adulteress, but rather of a woman caught between the laws of courtly love, chivalry, and Christianity. By courtly standards, she should be allowed to love whomever she chooses; by chivalric law, she must obey her liege lord; by Christian terms, she should be faithful to her husband. Of all the women in the medieval Arthurian tradition, Guenevere is the most powerful by worldly standards, for she is the queen of all England. Not even fairy women like Morgan le Fay or Nimue can exact as much of an influence. But with such a high position at court, Guenevere can never dabble in affairs as other women, including those named and others, can.

Well before Launcelot is introduced into the Arthurian canon, Guenevere is described as inconstant. As early as the twelfth century, Guenevere appears as one of the "Three Faithless Wives of the Isle of Britain": "Gwenhyfar, wife of Arthur, since she/ shamed a better man than any of them" (Wilhelm 23). She is ever held up to the faultless King Arthur and held lacking.

From the early twelfth century and onward, Guenevere's tensions grow. In Marie de France's "Lai de Lanval" a pattern begins to emerge. Guenevere follows the rules of courtly love, but fails as a Christian wife and a servant of Arthur; therefore, she is doomed to ill repute and punishment. The same story is taken up again by Thomas Chestre in the fifteenth century, but he portrays Guenevere not so much of a courtly woman attempting to win over her lover, but as a depraved nymphomaniac deserving of public humiliation and cruel punishment for her crimes against chivalry. The Lanval stories, seen as a pair, show how courtly love in the face of chivalric law is rendered impotent and impossible, especially for a woman. Agency cannot be found for women who are beholden to their king.

The nineteenth century saw a resurgence of popularity in Arthurian legend in art and in literature. Even before Tennyson published his *Idylls*, William Morris was penning a series of Guenevere-themed poems. As the Morris biographer Fiona MacCarthy explains in her biography *William Morris: A Life for Our Time,* the portrayal of Guenevere as "technically guilty but defying judgment was a picture of womanhood that haunted and dazzled and bewildered" him (97).

Early in his career, Morris published a slim volume of poems entitled *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems.* The longest poems in the collection were dedicated to a portrayal of Guenevere unlike any others before them. Like Browning, Morris chose to structure his poem in dramatic form, literally lending a voice to Guenevere. Morris's poem "The Defence of Guenevere" sees the queen defending herself before an angry mob of knights preparing to burn her at the stake. She becomes a

rhetorician, employing the laws of courtly love to defend herself. And it seems to work, for a time a least. Morris does not see courtly love failing in the eyes of chivalry as Chestre does, but he does envision another foe: Christianity. In “King Arthur’s Tomb,” the character of Guenevere resurfaces after the death of her liege lord. Now the rhetoric of courtly love cannot save her, and her only hope at true agency is by submitting to the only other option: to God Himself.

CHAPTER I

TRANSLATING THE QUEEN

Many consider Marie de France's *lais* to be the first important collection of medieval courtly romance. In her prologue, she claims that she has put "into word and rhyme" stories she had heard and, in turn, later authors retold in the tradition of medieval romance, her *lais* (41). Yet, Marie de France is herself a shadowed figure; we know she lived in the twelfth century at the court of Henry II in England, but no other information remains about her life. Her works attest to the fact that she was a literate woman writing *lais* about exceptionally masculine subjects: knights, kings, and chivalry. Her position alone raises many questions about female voice, perspective, and purpose. Recently, critics have tried their hand at defining Marie de France in feminist terms.[1] Sharon Kinoshita, who provides an overview of much of this criticism from the last fifty years, concludes her article "Cherchez La Femme: Feminist Criticism and Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval"* with the argument that the *lai* itself takes courtly themes to the extreme in order to challenge the patriarchy (263). Soon after the publication of Kinoshita's article, Jacqueline Eccles responded, providing a challenge to Kinoshita's interpretation of the *lais'* feministm. Eccles wonders whether it is "wise" to read *Lanval* in this way since feminism itself can be perceived as a"youthful concept" (281). She contests that the *lai* is

[1] There has also been a move to write about Marie de France's *Fables* as profeminine, heralded in particular by Sahar Amer. However, to her argument, there has been little dissent. See Amer, Sahar, Marie de France Rewrites Genesis: The Image of Woman in Marie de France's *Fables*" *Neophilogus* 81 (1997) 489-99.

best read in political[2] and judicial terms (281).

As Marie de France is a rare medieval woman writer, it is no surprise that some critics have found themselves exploring possible profeminine or pre-feminist readings of her works. Women come to the forefront in many of Marie de France's *lais* as sweet virgins, as abused or adulterous wives, and even as captivating fairy queens. But no other lay provides more in the way of pre-feminist potential, perhaps, than *Lai de Lanval*, a lay that seems to write its own rules in terms of chivalry and to concentrate on the female initiative. With a knightly fairy queen on one side and the unfaithful Guenevere on the other, Marie de France's *Lanval* creates an unusual range of characterization that speaks to the potential power and agency of women.

Marie de France's profeminst stance becomes clearer in the contrasts among her Lanval and subsequent versions of the romance. What can be seen upon exploring subsequent retellings of the Lanval stories is a predominant trend—mainly on the part of men—of rewriting Marie de France's to better suit gender stereotypes. Marie de France's Guenevere ultimately surfaces as a surprisingly sympathetic character in the range of portrayals that follow her Lanval.

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2 Other examples of relatively recent scholarship focus on the formal elements in Marie de France and Chestre and their respective Lanvals. For instance, R.N. Illingsworth, in his article "Structural Parallel in the *Lais* of *Lanval* and *Graelant*" gives an exceptionally detailed account of the side-by-side plot structures of these two *lais*, including a collection of extensive diagrams. David Carlson's "The Middle English 'Lanval'" makes an argument around extant manuscript fragments he posits to have influenced Chestre's particular retelling.

While Marie de France's *Lanval* is the oldest and most popular version of the *lai*, there are three medieval English texts that retell the story. While many critics have focused on the details in the structure of the *lai*, there is little scholarship in the way of intertextual investigation. Intertextuality is key, however, to understanding Marie de France's original text. For what surfaces in comparing Marie de France's *Lai de Lanval* to other Lanvals is a far richer pattern than any single study could provide; it reveals a desire on the part of translators to enhance or subdue aspects of many of the female characters in the original *Lanval*. Through examining the adaptations and additions in Thomas Chestre's 15th-century *Sir Launfal* and the later *Sir Lambewell,* and *Sir Landevale*, it is possible, in fact, to suggest a deliberate rewriting of the female characters of *Lanval*. Most importantly, it is Thomas Chestre who enhances Lanval's masculine agency in order to diminish much of the female agency that exists in Marie de France's version. Such revisions by Chestre and others reveal a need to alter in Marie de France what is perceived to be a challenge to patriarchal norms.

On the surface, these retellings of Lanval follow many of the same conventions as Marie de France's original. The main plot arcs match: a young knight in King Arthur's court, Lanval, is overlooked when Arthur grants land and wealth to his stalwart knights. Instead of raging against the throne and crying injustice, Lanval remains a knight of remarkable virtue—disappointed, and yet still compliant with the law.[3] While he is resting under a tree one day, two beautiful woman approach him and bring him to a

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3 In the Percy Folio, Lambewell is not so much overlooked by Arthur, but rather becomes impoverished because of his own spending. This pivotal change is explored later in the paper.

young woman, a queen of fairies, who is lovely beyond measure. This fairy queen has been watching Lanval and now desires to be his lover; he, of course, grants her this request, as should any romance hero. The fairy queen contrives for Lanval never to run out of money, so long as he tells no living soul of their affair or her existence. She gives him the gift of immeasurable largesse, that great chivalric virtue which he had, until this point, been unable to practice. Lanval's life should be quite happy—he has the love of the most beautiful woman in all the world and can never run out of money. However, the hero Lanval ends up in a double-bind due to Queen Guenevere. The queen spies him from her high tower one afternoon and is immediately smitten with the young, generous knight. Lanval, being virtuous and good, refuses her advances, explaining that he has a lover more fair than she. This enrages the jealous queen, who not only is refused, but insulted, and she then enlists Arthur to help her seek revenge. Claiming that Lanval had propositioned her and insulted her by saying he had a lover fairer than she, Guenevere is able to gain the King's protection. Ultimately, Lanval is brought to court to be tried, and though it apepars as if he is to be found guilty, at the last moment, the fairy-lover rides into the court in all her glory—a resplendent court of ladies about her—and saves him. The two escape to the land of Fairy, to Avalon, and are never seen again.

Critics praise Marie de France's artistry. Her recent editors, Hanning and Ferrante, call her "perhaps the greatest woman author of the Middle Ages and the creator of certainly the finest medieval short fiction before Boccaccio and Chaucer" (1). Marie de France is masterful not only in her verse but also in her theme. "What emerges," Hanning and Ferrante explain, "is not a unified moral perspective on passion and its

consequences: Marie's art avoids easy generalizations" (2). This layered quality to Marie de France's work is precisely what makes later revisions so intriguing; the later alterations later writers make to Lanval call to attention her careful irony and social commentary.

Anna Laskaya provides an excellent view into the character of Chestre's *Launfal*. She keenly demonstrates many of the most important revisions undertaken in Chestre's version and argues that recent critics have misjudged the work, frequently holding it up to Marie de France's version and finding it decidedly lacking. Perhaps the critical stigma surrounding *Launfal* as a "lower-class" work, described as "crude and even repulsive," has prevented much in the way of serious scholarship (193). Laskaya is the first to admit that *Launfal* lacks many of the poetic intricacies of its predecessor but stresses the importance of learning to reconfigure the tale in an intertextual context. She concentrates on the actions of the protagonist of the tale, Lanval; she mentions revisions of the female characters only in passing as her focus is, as the title announces, "Revisions of Manhood." However, Laskaya's article works to establish an intriguing connection between Launfal's "revisions of manhood" and the decision on the part of Chestre to revise womanhood, and in particular, the womanhood of one of the most powerful women in the text: Queen Guenevere. By emphasizing Lanval's manhood, enhancing his growth as a man in a courtly setting, Laskaya suggests, Chestre must then distort and diminish the agency, in particular, of Guenevere

Other retellings exist, including the *Lanval* of The Percy Folio version, *Sir Lambewell*, which as Helen Cooper finds to be, "more or less" in "original medieval

form" (30)[4]. Cooper explains that the collection is "more compatible with orthodox Christian morality (adultery is out; pre-marital sex is just that, pre-marital, and even that is rare); quite a number are overtly pious" (30). The poem *Sir Lambewell* is sandwiched in between dozens of other tales, songs, and romances in the manuscript, which seems to have been compiled sometime in the 16th century, written mostly in one hand.[5] A first reading of *Sir Lambewell*, especially in contrast to Marie de France and Chestre, finds it resoundingly lacking. Unlike Chestre's awkward and almost laughable tail-rhyme, which evokes in many ways Chaucer's *Sir Thopas*, *Sir Lambewell* consists of rhyming couplets, by and large. In this way, at least from a lyrical standpoint, echoes Marie de France's version. *Sir Lambewell* retains much of the familiar plot of Marie de France, including sexuality, adultery, and betrayal, though it seems low key.

There is yet another version of Lanval, a couplet poem, *Sir Landevale.* Though there are always difficulties in assessing which version preceded the other, it is generally agreed that the original version of *Sir Landevale* surfaced first, with Chestre's following.

Elizabeth Williams explains in her article "'A Damsel by Herselfe Alone' Images of Magic and Femininity from *Lanval* to *Sir Lambewell*"

> The text usually entitled *Sir Landevale*, preserved in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson C.86, is generally regarded as the best, and it was from an exemplar very close to this in its readings that Thomas Chestre, later in the fourteenth century,

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4 Since the scope of this paper concentrates primarily on intertextual relationships and not historical details, the importance of the Percy Folio's authenticity is not terribly necessary. The argument hinges on retellings, and as such, the Percy Folio works sufficiently.

5 The Percy Folio shows extensive damage in some areas, and emendations by Percy who strived to make the meter and subject of the poems more appealing, to himself at least. There is even an indication that the folio was used to light fires, as many of the pages are singed.

> remodelled the lay into the tailrhyme romance of *Sir Launfal*. Engaging as it is, however, *Sir Launfal* survives in only one manuscript, London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii, which, perversely, is earlier than any of the five witnesses to the couplet version which it derives from; but, despite the change of metre, and substantive additions to the plot, Chestre's tail-rhyme text can often be used to clarify readings in the couplet version, which is usually judged to be artistically inferior, but which was still finding readers in the age of printing. (Williams 156)

Lambewell, however, does not fit in within the others as easily as one might think. Cooper's comments are misleading, as she omits the existence of the other Lanval retelling, the precursor to *Lambewell*, the rhymed couplet of the Rawlinson manuscript, *Sir Landevale. Sir Landevale* remains intensely important in the study of these Lanvals.

> It is usual to regard the extant English couplet texts as a group and to separate them from the tail-rhyme *Sir Launfal*, but in view of the latter's often close verbal links with the couplet version, and the very late date of the Percy Folio, for present purposes we may think in terms of a three-stage, chronological development: first the twelfth-century *Lanval* (here designated L); then a fourteenth-century stage, represented by the Rawlinson *Sir Landevale* (R) and often visible also in Chestre's *Sir Launfa*l (C); and, finally, a last, late redaction of the couplet text, as seen in the Percy Sir *Lambewel*l (P). (Williams 156-7)

The English grouping Williams employs is also helpful for the aim of this particular project.[6]

In order to understand, then, what exactly Marie de France's narrative choices mean, it is necessary to take a much closer look at the texts, in particular Chestre's

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[6] While her research concentrates primarily on the subtle changes in the fairy-lover throughout the texts, and the magical elements which shift from telling to telling, it solidifies another strain in Laskaya's reading of Chestre's masculinization of Lanval.

version, in comparison to the original Lanval.

Guenevere is a perplexing character to study because she changes so little in Arthurian romance. She is as she is expected to be: lustful, inconstant, jealous, and petty. In fact, one of the first mentions of Guenevere appears in a 12th-century Welsh manuscript which, like many extant sources of Arthurian material, is believed to be informed by a much older oral tradition. The poem lists her under "Three Faithless Wives of the Isle of Britain":"Gwenhyfar, wife or Arthur, since she/ shamed a better man than any of them" (Wilhelm 23). So from the earliest beginnings of the Arthurian legend, Guenevere is granted very little in the way of sympathy; she is simply an adulterer and a traitor. Unlike the shifting character of Gawain in Arthurian romances, Guenevere remains surprisingly static, defined by her adultery, circumscribed by her sins. As such, it remains difficult, and perhaps anachronistic, to read Marie de France's Guenevere as a particularly profeminist character. A quick first glance at the *lai* reveals little that sets apart Marie de France's queen from any other renditions; she is emotional, jealous, petty, and vain.

And yet, there are tantalizing moments when Marie de France's Guenevere springs to life. She wields a vast amount of power as the Arthur's wife after all, and Marie de France often reflects this agency in her choice of words. In the scene when Guenevere first spies Lanval from her tower, he is sitting apart from his friends. Gawain has convinced him to take a walk about with the other knights, but Lanval is so plagued with love-sickness due to separation from his fairy-lover that he cannot fully interact with his companions. He is the archetypal romance hero, but with a twist.

At this point, the commentary shifts perspective and Guenevere and her ladies descend into the courtyard. The queen immediately approaches Lanval and request that he be her lover:

Al chevalier en va tut dreit;	[S]he went straight to the knight.
Lez lui s'asist, si l'apela,	She sat beside him and spoke,
Tut sun curage li mustra:	*revealing her whole heart:*
"Lanval, mult vus ai honuré	"Lanval, I have shown you much honor,
E mult cherie mult amé;	I have cherished you, and loved you.
Tute m'amur pez aveir:	You may have all my love;
Kar me dites vostre voleir!	just tell me your desire.
Ma druerie vus otrei.	promise you my affection.
(Rychner ll. 260-268)	(Hanning ll. 260-68)

The queen's potentially damning proposition to a young, virtuous knight appears surprisingly sincere. She reveals to him her whole *heart*—"tut sun curage" in the original French—and makes clear her desire for the young knight (Rychner 263). In this way, she works as an important compliment to the fairy-lover early on in the poem. Both women assert a remarkable amount of power by seeking out their desired men, but the fairy-lover is granted full sensuality and access to Lanval while Guenevere's desire is suppressed[7].

7 David Carlson, in his article "The Middle English *Lanval"* dates the *Launfal* "perhaps seventy-five years after *Landevale"* (97). Further complicating matters of derivation, Carlson's aim is to point to the now lost Middle English translation of *Lanval* as a source for all three extant English Lanvals—not, as some would imagine, the original by Marie de France. While this paper makes no attempt to claim either, and its focus revolves not around authenticity and chains of influence, it should be understood that Middle English translation or not, each of these stories stems from the Breton lai *Lanval*. It is the retelling, the recrafting, that is of particular interest.

The fairy-queen earlier won Lanval over with these words:

"Lanval," she said, "sweet love,
because of you I have come from my land;
I came to seek you from far away.
If you are brave and courtly,
no emperor or count or king
will ever have known such joy or good. (ll. 110-115)

The fairy-queen seeks out Lanval, as has Guenevere. But the fairy-queen's speech revolves around granting power to the knight, promising him joys that equal those of emperors and kings. She appeals to his desire for power with her lustful *largesse* and immediate sexual satisfaction. And just as Guenevere has spied Lanval from afar, so too does the love of the fairy-queen. When the fairy-green grants him a gift "The more lavishly he spends,/ the more gold and silver he will have" she is clear about the punishment should he let anyone know about her. Their relationship, it appears, hinges on a combination of the visual and the sexual.

"Love," she said, "I admonish you now,
I command and beg you,
do not let any man know about this.
I shall tell you why:
you would lose me fort good
if this love were known;
you would never see me again
or possess my body." (ll. 142-150)

In contrast, Guenevere's language expresses *love* rather than *lust*; she is emotional, almost spiritual. She speaks of her honor *to him*, and her love *for him*, but promises nothing more than love and affection. Although Guenevere speaks as she should, and her love seems as genuine, if not more so, than the fairy-queen's, she is rejected. The social context defines the Queen primarily as a wife of the king and excludes her from the kind of agency granted so freely to the fairy-queen. Guenevere is seeped in a very real world.

Lanval, functioning within the constraints of courtly love and the rigid system of Arthurian law, rejects Guenevere outright, without even a moment's hesitation. She is a married woman, and Lanval appears acutely aware of the danger in committing adultery with the wife of the Queen; he refuses Guenevere's advances because of fealty to Arthur; his loyalty to his king repels any attraction to the queen, while her love for him repels her duty to Arthur.

> 'My lady,' he said, 'let me be!
> I have no desire to love you.
> I've served the king a long time;
> I don't want to betray my faith to him.
> Never, for you or your love,
> will I do anything to harm my lord." (ll. 269-274).

At this moment Marie de France defines a great rift between the world of men and the world of women within the tale of *Lanval*, a theme that is picked up by successive retellings. In spite of Guenevere's agency, her proposal to Lanval and her spying him from the tower, Lanval manages to erase her power in a few words. He speaks of her only

in terms of her King, her overlord, and his.

When Lanval responds to his fairy-lover earlier, the language is completely different, though the situation is very much the same. Lanval throws himself on the mercy of the fairy-lover, pledging to do anything she asks of him, that being his greatest desire. She then grants him "her love and her body" (ll. 133). Lanval responds to the fairy-lover as a kind of slave, one who is powerless to do anything at his own behest:

> "Lovely one," he said, "if it pleased out
> if such joy might be mine
> that you would love me,
> there is nothing you might command,
> within my power, that I would not do,
> whether foolish or wise.
> I shall obey your command;
> for you I shall abandon everyone.
> I want never to leave you.
> That is what I most desire." (Hanning l. 121-129)

Lanval's speech to the fairy-lover hinges, and subsequent submission, reflect the relative ease of the relationship. In loving the fairy-lover, Lanval is beholden to no one but her; with Guenevere, to submit to her is to betray his king. Lanval is not concerned whether or not his fairy-woman is married or chaste. He accepts her as otherworldly and entirely separate from society. These two scenes establish the essential dividing line between the real world, where a woman regardless of her power and stature expresses her love only to be rejected, the fairy world, where women can satisfy desire and gain love. It is certainly not a comfortable feminist argument, but it does leave room for speculation.

Fanciful or not, the women in Marie de France's *Lanval* have access to and use power in the presence of men. But this can only apply to women who are not forbidden from such power by their social standings. It is this delineation, between the otherworldly and the "real" world, that ostensibly alienates Guenevere from ever succeeding as a courtly figure. Lanval or Launcelot, she is doomed to suffer since to follow her heart, she must betray Arthur.

Guenevere is particularly important because she not only reflects the fairy queen as a powerful woman, but also works in contrast to Lanval himself. Although many medieval writers incorporate the eyes as instruments of love, Marie de France's *Lanval* seems to employ the eyes even more. Eyes become a vehicle for much more than admiration and love: they are integral to desire and possession, a theme element which is central in Chestre's renovation. When Lanval comes across the fairy queen in Marie de France, it is his act of seeing her which moves him to love: "He looked at her and saw that she was beautiful;/ Love stung him with a spark/ that burned and set fire to his heart" (l. 117-119, Hanning and Ferrante). And it is not a threat of infidelity or hatred that keeps Lanval silent, but rather the threat of never seeing the fairy queen again--not being able to see her, to possess her with his eyes, is the greatest punishment. Guenevere, too, uses her eyes as instruments of lust and possession. She, in fact, is looking down at *all* of Arthur's men from her window and then specifically "sees" Lanval . Then, Guenevere does as the fairy queen had; she arrays her ladies about her in order to make a grand appearance before Lanval. However, as we know, Lanval's rebuff of Guenevere' is vastly different from his response to the fairy-queen. By emphasizing Guenevere's spontaneous love for

Lanval, however, Marie de France sympathizes with her character's passion, while Chestre later uses her vision as an instrument for sin which must be severely punished.

It is Thomas Chestre, whose version appears some three hundred years after Marie de France's *Lanval*, who lends a most interesting contrast to her *lai*. Chestre's imaginative alterations to the text reconfigure some of the more unusual details of *Lanval* into a much more sinister story. Even before the main players of the romance are introduced, it is clear that Chestre's Arthurian backdrop is a significant departure from Marie de France's. Anna Laskaya attributes this change to a need, on the part of Chestre, to revise masculinity and manhood in his version. This certainly seems to be the case, as the opening lines of Chestre are not the typical *in medias res* of Marie de France. Marie de France simply introduces Lanval as the title character, then proceeds to locate the *lai* in terms of Arthur, the king, who begins the story by giving wealth—or overlooking the giving—to his vassals. Chestre completely rewrites the tale from the outset. The opening lines of *Sir Launfal* begin, not at the time of the rest of the tale, but before Arthur is married to Guenevere. This is of central importance as it distinguishes between the halcyon days of lusty Arthur and his knights and his downfall with Guenevere. Chestre, much like his contemporary Malory, also feels the need to catalog the knights of the Round Table—all the Orkneys are mentioned, along with Lancelot, Percival, Yvain and the rest. This decision not only locates Chestre's story as part of the Arthurian milieu, but also establishes that his tale is very much in the world of *men.*

Chestre changes much, but nothing so liberally as the character of Guenevere. Anne Laskaya describes Chestre's depiction as being in concert with older, less sympathetic

versions of Guenevere, such as those mentioned in the Welsh poems (198). Central to Chestre's retelling, however, is his deliberate alteration of the inaugural plot; that is, a sign of the failure of Arthur to reward faithful Lanval with *largesse.* Instead, Chestre harkens back to the "good old days" when Arthur was a bachelor and Lanval was an honored steward of the castle; he makes it clear that in *those* days, Lanval was highly favored. Not only is Lanval one of the greatest knights, but he is the most generous: his *largesse* outshines all the rest:

> He gaf gyftys largelyche,
> Gold and sylver, and clothes ryche,
> To squyer and to knyght. (l. 28-30)

It is only the entrance of Guenevere that changes this bliss.

Chestre remarks upon first seeing the queen that

> But Syr Launfal lykede her noght,
> Ne other knyghtes that wer hende;
> For the lady bar los of swych word
> That sche hadde lemannys under her lord
> So fele ther nas noon ende. (l. 43-48)

Here, Lanval's distaste for the queen is clearly motivated by his disrespect of him. She is significantly more lustful than Marie de France's character, a queen indulging in many affairs, and not just with the famed Launcelot. Chestre reads a bit like a tall-tale. Guenevere is outright vindictive in Chestre. She both supplants him as a favorite at court

and, when the royal couple hosts a large feast in honor of the knights she, and not Arthur, leaves Lanval out. The idea of Arthur breaking one of the tenets of chivalry seems to be too much for Chestre. Instead, he sets up Guenevere perfectly in the text, eradicating any kind of sympathy one might have for her. She is not only an adulteress, but she is violates the tenets of chivalry. Unlike in Marie de France's narrative, where Guenevere appears only to Lanval to express her desire for him and functions as a kind of lover's test, Chestre casts Guenevere as the main antagonist from the very beginning so that he can reconstruct Lanval in terms of masculinity. Marie de France never gives a reason for Lanval's departure from court, after which he ultimately finds his fairy-lover, other than general malaise over being forgotten. However, Chestre draws a direct parallel between Lanval's departure from court and Guenevere's promiscuity; it is not Arthur's lack of generosity that casts Lanval out, but a moral dilemma, for which "Chestre holds Guenevere solely responsible" (Laskaya 198).

In Marie de France, even in Guenevere's most vicious moments, the narrator seems hesitant to blame her. The queen's lashing out at Lanval stems from anger and hurt, not necessarily out of spite. Guenevere, when rejected, turns against Lanval and immediately insults his manhood, implying that he prefers young men over women.

> "Lanval," she said, "I am sure
> you don't care for such pleasure;
> people have often told me
> that you have no interest in women.
> You have fine-looking boys
> with whom you enjoy yourself.
> Base coward, lousy cripple,
> my lord made a bad mistake

when he let you stay with him.
For all I know, he'll lose God because of it." (Hanning and Ferrante l. 277-286)

Guenevere is angry and distraught and undoubtedly surprised for, after adhering to the rules of courtly love she should not be rejected. She escapes to her room and weeps disconsolately. This directly mirrors what happens to Lanval some twenty lines later, when he, after divulging to Guenevere that he had a lover more fair than she, retires to his room in despair. Though Lanval is depicted as undoubtedly more sympathetic than Guenevere, the juxtaposition of the two, both in agony over separation from their lovers or would-be lovers, deserves attention. Although Marie de France in no way downplays Guenevere's selfish vanity, it is as if she is allwed, in spite of her flaws, the right to experience heartbreak and love in the same terms as Lanval.

In Chestre, the same scene between Lanval and Guenevere is remarkably different. Although, again by Gawain's bidding, Lanval is brought out to socialize with the other knights, the tone is much more playful, consistent with much of Chestre's tone throughout. Guenevere, from her window, watches all the knights, led by dashing Lanval, dancing upon the green below her tower. The dance calls to mind, for instance, the dancing fairy women the rapist knights comes across in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*. However, the gender here is swapped. What appears to attract Guenevere to Lanval is his "largesse," his generosity. "'I se,' sche seyde, 'daunce large Lanufalle;/ to hym than wyll y go'" (ll. 646-7).

This section can be read one of two ways. Either the Queen explicitly seeks out Lanval for his virtue, in a way to corrupt what is pure, or she is simply expressing lust for him. The latter seems probable, as the scene lends itself to a sexually heightened reading. While Marie de France's scene unfolds in relative quiet, the Queen talking to Lanval as he is in contemplation over his absent love, Chestre's scene is alive with sexual energy. The description of the scene is hectic, frenzied, and prolonged:

> To daunce they wente, all yn same:
> To se hem play, hyt was fayr game,
> A lady and a knyght.
> They hadde menstrales of moch honors,
> Fydelers, sytolyrs, and troupours,
> And elles hyt were unryght;
> Ther they playde, forsothe to say,
> After mete, the somerys day
> Al that hyt was neygh nyght. (ll. 664-673).

Launfal is not only as desired in the eyes of Guenevere, but in the eyes of all her ladies, some sixty or so, Chestre counts. It is summer, and the music is loud and manic. They are accompanied by a myriad of fiddlers and trumpeters and great minstrels, and they dance well into the night. The repetition of the word "playe" reiterates the sexual connotation as well, enhanced by the comparison of the dance to a game; but here, it is the man who is the hunted. Guenevere is a sexual predator, and her pun on "large" recalls both the chivalrous qualities of Launfal, his *largesse*, but also his physical nature. As the hectic scene emphasizes the physicality of the dancers, so too does Guenevere's continued assessment of the dancing knight:

"I se," sche seyde, "daunce large Launfalle;
To hym than wyll Y go.
Of alle the knyghtes that Y se there,
He ys the fayreste bachelere;
He ne hadde never no wyf.
Tyde me good other ylle,
I wyll go and wyte hys wylle;
Y love hym as my lyf!"

Guenevere's language describes the physicality of Launfal's attractiveness and expreses the queen's unsettling corruption.. Guenevere revels in the fact that Launfal has not married, once again, she finds his purity attractive. It works in contrast to her own sin, which Chestre has taken great pains to mention from the very beginning of his tale.

Once the dance is over, Guenevere's proposition speech is all the more vapid and sickly-sweet for Chestre's changes. There is no exposure of "tut sun curage" or any remnant of true sincerity as in Marie de France. Chestre begins her proposal with the words "And seyde yn thys manere" which lends a calculated feeling to the speech, something hollow and strange:

"Sertaynlyche, Syr Knyght,
I have the lovyd wyth al my myght
More than thys seven yere!
But that thou lovye me,
Sertes y dye fore love of the,
Launfal, my lemman dere!" (ll. 676-680)

While Marie de France phrases Guenevere's language in terms of her heart, Chestre uses the word "might." She loves Launfal, she says, with all her *power*—her physical

power, one would be quick to assume, but also her Queenly power, as the wife of Arthur. This conflation of physical lust and worldly power mitigates against a sympathetic reading for Guenevere in Chestre's rendition.

Chestre also heightens the scene in which Guenevere removes to her room. Instead of falling ill for rejection and shame, it is more selfishly motivated: "For wrethe, syk sche hyr bredde" (l. 704). By making *herself* sick, rather than falling ill for shame as in Marie de France, Guenevere's act is more contrived, highly performative. She is wrathful and furious, plotting revenge at every turn in order to avenge *herself*. Though there are hints of Guenevere's divisiveness in Marie de France, it is no where near as pronounced as here in Chestre. But the queen's threat to the chivalric fellowship is integral for Chestre's presentation of a Launfal "remasculated". Chestre's Guenevere, is a woman with no good qualities whatsoever comes full circle in his later decision in the narrative. She cannot be allowed space to grieve in a believable manner because her humiliation, rejection, and subsequent revenge-seeking is central to Chestre's emphasis on Launfal's masculine growth, which is more important to him by far than Guenevere's courtly accomplishments. In spite of her adherence to courtly law, since she is Arthur's wife, she must be portrayed a hysterical woman, controlled by irrational emotions, the opposite of the composed Launfal. It is Guenevere's loss of agency, then, and her retreat and reliance on Arthur, that fuels Launfal's ultimate escape and full acceptance as a man in society.

Once Launfal is redeemed by his fairy-lover, and she rescues him from impending death due to the spiteful nature of Guenevere, Chestre's story should come to a close. Marie de France chooses to turn the narrative away from Guenevere; she becomes less

important, the beauty of the fairy queen and her ladies in waiting literally eclipsing the Queen's presence. She is not mentioned again as Lanval jumps upon the fairy queen's horse and is swept away to Avalon, never again to live among mortal men. The only instance of Marie de France citing Guenevere again is immediately before the arrival of the fairy-lover; there, Arthur's Queen is described as being only impatient. Though Marie de France presents Guenevere as a clearly flawed woman, she fades into the background in order to put the fairy-lover at center stage; the moment when she pulls Lanval up behind her on the steed is filled with such perplexing role-reversal and exercise in ultimate female agency, it deserves full attention. It is only here, in the world of fairy, that Marie de France implies, the woman can fulfill their sexual desires according to the rules of courtly love.

However, Chestre does not leave Guenevere's fate to be imagined by the reader in the tale as Marie de France does. Earlier on in Chestre's poem, when Lanval is attesting that his fairy-lover is more beautiful than any living woman, Guenevere japes before the Court: "Yyf he bryngeth a fayrer thynge,/ Put out my eeyn gray!" (809-810). Guenevere's rashw rods, like Dorigen's hasty oath in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* seems to reiterate a similar mentality, that (especially) a woman must be careful about speaking spontaneously. However, unlike Dorigen who is saved at the last moment from suffering such consequences due to her words, Guenevere is forever changed. While the lilting, end-rhymed tone of Chestre's poem would suggest a playful air about this oath, readers are astonished to find that it is not dismissed. When the fairy-lover appears at court, welcomed like a great queen, Guenevere's oath is fulfilled—the fairy-queen breathes on

Guenevere's eyes, blinding her. What power she once had in her eyes, spying Lanval from afar and exacting such desire is now quite literally put out (Laskaya 203). Moreover, it is the rival female whom Chestre makes responsible for Guenevere's punishment, thus implying that women compete for men and exercise cruel vengeance on those defeated.

At the end of Chestre's story, Guenevere's punishment comes not at the hands of men, but at the hands of another woman[8]. These two queens, one of the earthly realm and one of the fairy-realm, are the female characters in competition for Lanval. Yet, they are connected by their gender—they form a kind of third society between Arthur's court and the world of Fairy, a world of women. Chestre cannot judge the fairy-lover to be particularly insidious, since she carries with her a most important plot device: the rescue and redemption of Lanval. However, the fairy-lover and Guenevere act as mirror images. Both desire Lanval; both choose him specifically; both are queens; both watch him, unseen; and both are followed by an entourage of female attendants. But Guenevere represents a very real threat, a threat which ultimately destroys the entire kingdom through her adultery with Lancelot. Lanval is no Lancelot, and the fairy-queen no Guenevere; their affair, regardless of how morally questionable, will do nothing to affect the fabric of Arthurian society.

The most profound difference between the two women is their mobility. Though Guenevere exercises a surprising amount of agency through her unfaithfulness and

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[8] Traditionally, Guenevere is found out by Gawain for her affair with Launcelot. Malory, Chestre's contemporary, utilized this scenario in *Le Morte D'Arthur*—eventually the queen is brought to the stake.

flirting, she can only do it from within the confines of the castle; all of her scenes take place in towers, courtyards, and enclosed rooms. Her space is one of confinement. Everyone else around Guenevere, in either telling, moves freely; Chestre mentions hunting trips, and frequently sends Lanval away on adventures to the town. The fairy-queen, being otherworldly, and the only realm in which a female character can find true agency and mobility. Her encounters are in windswept fields, in lavish tents from far away, and on magical, mysterious steeds which represent her power and her ability to travel far and wide. Guenevere is condemned to be perverse and base, instead of admired and revered as the fairy-lover is, simply on the basis that she is Arthur's wife. No matter how strictly she adheres to the laws of courtly love, she is to represent her husband, and for Chestre she is marked as sinful, miserable, and lascivious. In both versions of the poem, Lanval equates sleeping with the queen not with his own impurity, but with dishonoring his lord. Therefore, Guenevere is not only a moral failure, but also a social failure. The fairy-lover, presumably unmarried, faces none of the consequences Guenevere does. As a woman outside of society, she is not bound by its rules.

The fairy-queen, free as she might seem, cannot function within the same structure as Guenevere, namely Arthur's court and the world of "reality"; and since she cannot be without Lanval, therefore they must remove completely to Avalon. The tensions between the queens are not so apparent in Marie de France, but the blinding scene in Chestre provides a fully "winning" situation for Lanval—as established earlier, Lanval spied the fairy-queen, but Guenevere spied Lanval. The power of sight, of the eyes, is not lost on Chestre. Laskaya's regards the blinding of Guenevere in *Launfal* as a means for Lanval to

claim his masculinity, but it also obliterates the very instrument of Guenevere's treachery; blinding her is a kind of castration, violence against the very thing that gives her such pleasure and agency. This conclusion, with its dark turn, solidifies the future of Lanval and his fairy-lover, but only at the cost of Guenevere's suffering (Laskaya 203).

How and why one chooses to tell a tale is often a mystery. In the Medieval period, when retelling tales was itself an art, it is in the subtle, and perhaps sometimes, not so subtle, revisions new authors undertake that can often change a story altogether, or illuminate the culture from whence it came. Marie de France's motives behind her unique knightly fairy-queen and the heart-sick Guenevere are unknown; however the complexities of her depictions are nonetheless interesting studies in female agency in the worlds of reality and fantasy.

Throughout all the retellings of Lanval, it is Thomas Chestre's calculated decisions to enhance Lanval's masculinity at the cost of Guenevere's sexual desire and female agency that appear as the most harsh. Chestre chooses to revise Guenevere in order to remasculate Lanval; she becomes all the more base and wanton, so Lanval can be more virtuous. From an intertextual standpoint, these works enter into a kind of dialogue and become distorted mirror images of one another. While none of the versions seem to rule out true female agency in the world of Fairy, all agree that Guenevere, the only powerful woman in the texts who survives in the "real" world at the end of the poem, is impotent. Chestre's decision to blind her, destroying the instrument of both her agency and desire, is symbolic of a need to mitigate the power of women in the wake of masculine chivalry.

Ultimately, Chestre is able to recast the masculinity of his hero at the expensive of the female characters, leaving room for women of power and agency only to exist in the land of Fairy. Guenevere, in spite of her attempts in Marie de France and later Chestre, to act as a courtly lover, is unable to achieve agency due to her status as queen. Arthur's shadow looms large in Marie de France, but even larger in Chestre, eventually leading to an all-out demonized portrayal of a woman lost to sin. What was once passion becomes lust, what was love becomes obsession, and ultimately, we lose Guenevere entirely.

CHAPTER II

A CASE FOR GUENEVERE

In 1858, a young William Morris published a slender edition of poetry entitled *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*. Not yet the consummate artistic virtuoso and political activist of later renown, his literary contribution was largely ignored. Contemporary perceptions aside, the volume's longest poems, "The Defence of Guenevere" and "King Arthur's Tomb", both concern the character of Queen Guenevere and explore the tensions inherent in romance, the struggle between courtly love and religion. Deeply influenced by Malory's *Morte D'Arthur*, Morris sought to balance his deep fascination with the medieval period with what Ingrid Bryden in her book *Reinventing King Arthur* calls "a Pre-Raphaelitism which privileges chivalric over marital love" (100). Morris employs the art of dramatic monologue to allow the reader access to the psychological state of Guenevere, a woman defined and betrayed by the courtly love tradition. By examining the two poems in sequence, a pattern emerges; Morris, ever adherent to Malory's ambiguous presentation of the Middle Ages, nonetheless equips Guenevere with the keys to her own agency. Ultimately, through the power of her own voice and performance, Guenevere frees herself from the stifling convention of courtly love, by breaking the bonds of her countrymen, King, and at last, lover.

That Morris chose an Arthurian figure to the illustrate his difficulties with courtly love is not surprising. Morris and his contemporaries, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Algernon Charles Swinburne, rediscovered Malory, and helped usher the Victorian preoccupation with Medieval Arthurian mythology. The Arthur factor certainly permeated the social consciousness of the time, inspiring numerous poems, painting, and other art works. [9] Morris's particular take on the Malory remains ambiguous, a stance that is faithful to Malory's initial presentation since, as Laura Cooner Lambdin and Robert Thomas Lambdin explain in their book *Camelot in the Nineteenth Century: Arthurian Characters in the Poems of Tennyson, Arnold, Morris, and Swinburne,* "the medieval writer was frequently unclear about the meanings of his many interwoven tales (74).

That he chose the complicated, and often scandalous, character of Guenevere, however, was a particularly bold move on the Morris's part. And rather than portray her in a sympathetic or damning way, he approaches her from a distance, as an onlooker, using the inherent ambiguity in Malory to his own ends. The character of Guenevere, "technically guilty but defying judgment, was a picture of womanhood that haunted and dazzled and bewildered" Morris, as Fiona MacCarthy explains in her biography, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (97).

Both Guenevere poems make use of dramatic form in the tradition of Browning. Though "The Defence of Guenevere" and "King Arthur's Tomb" are not the only poems with Arthurian connections in Morris's corpus of works, the two poems are arguably

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[9] In fact, both the "Defense" and "King Arthur's Tomb" are named after paintings by Rossetti.

some of his most skillful. Yet the young Morris did not count poetry among his greatest abilities:

> As a poet Morris failed to take himself quite seriously. This was partly a result of his great fluency: poetry came too easily. He could not bring himself to view as a profession an activity that really seemed domestic entertainment…After *Guenevere* he entered a long silence. He published nothing for the next eight years.

Whatever Morris's personal aims as poet, the poems were not well received in his time; "most reviews were unenthusiastic" (MacCarthy 146).

Yet what remains at the heart of Morris's poems is a keen recognition of the tensions in courtly romance. Guenevere, as the wife of Arthur, is at constant odds both with the laws of courtly love and of Christianity. While other women, including Iseult and Nimue, are allowed for the most part in Malory and other medieval treatments, to pursue love outside the constraints of marriage, Guenevere cannot. She is ever defined by her status as queen and therefore held to different standards in society. This conflict, along with an intense desire to reconcile the aesthetic exterior with the faulted psychological interior, moves "The Defence of Guenevere" and "King Arthur's Tomb" along. Morris continually counterpoises the typified version of Guenevere as beautiful, jealous, and adulterous, with another of her as powerful and intelligent.

Throughout his work, Morris appears unsatisfied with aspects of Malory's Guenevere, who in moments of extreme duress practically vanishes from the scene. Morris cannot adhere to such strict ambivalence in his narrative. His Guenevere is not simply a beautiful woman; rather, she is a beautiful woman with impressive rhetoric skill

who uses her own weapons, namely her beauty and voice, in her own defense. It is not to say, however, that Morris refrains from judgement. Though she is given plenty of room to be heard, there still remains an uncomfortable space between her performance and her true intent. At times she is self-absorbed, even self-serving, resulting in an enigmatic but effective portrait of the woman, flaws and all. Robert L. Stallman, in his article "The Lover's Progress: An Investigation of William Morris' 'The Defence of Guenevere' and 'King Arthur's Tomb'" writes that Morris's most impressive literary accomplishment is that he "created one prime figure, Guenevere, who moved about, acted, and spoke in an astonishingly real manner" (658). For Morris the truth lies no so much in deciphering right and wrong, or good and evil, but in the details of the character.

Ultimately, Morris's Guenevere is presented as fully as possible, as a psychologically developed woman portrayed in two desperate instances—one at the prime of her life, and the other at the twilight. Morris's incorporation of the dramatic form enables him to slough away the layers of artifice present in so many examples of Arthurian romance, to bring us "disturbingly close" to the character of Guenevere, in whom rest the conflicts at the heart of courtly love in the medieval period and by extension, in the Victorian age (Stevenson 140).

The inspiration for Morris's Guenevere is culled directly from Malory. That Guenevere is both beautiful and wicked is a theme frequently repeated by Malory, most often through the eyes of the court around her. She is constantly suspected when things go awry, as her unfaithfulness to Arthur is well known. Since she cannot be faithful to her husband, the king, many in the court regard her as a disruptive force. As such, Guenevere

frequently comes under attack throughout *Le Morte D'Arthur*. In one instance she is accused of poisoning one of the members of the court, and Sir Bors, who has been enlisted to fight on her behalf and therefore must speak well of her, attempts to sway the court in her favor:

> 'Wete you well, my fayre lordis, hit were shame to us all and we suffird to se the moste noble queen of the worlde to be shamed obynly, consyderyng her lourde and our lourde ys the man of most worship crystynde, and he hath ever worshipped us all in all places.'
>
> Many answered him agayne, 'As for our moste noble kynge Arthure, we love hym and honore hym as well as ye do, but as for queen Gwenyvere, we love hir nat, because she ys a destroyer of good knyghtes.' (Vinaver 617)

The best defense Bors can muster hinges on Guenevere's proximity to Arthur and not her personal virtue; she is simply Arthur's wife, and therefore is "moste noble". But this justification is far from acceptable in the eyes of the lords and knights of the court. Every at the ready for a new accusation and trial, the bloodthirsty nobles have no sympathy for the queen. Bors feebly attempts to rally to her side again by simply denying their charges: "She was a maynteyner of good knyghtes, and the moste bownteous lady of her gyfftis and her good grace that I ever saw other harde speak of" (617). As well intended as the speech is, for those in the court familiar with Guenevere's tendencies, it does little to refute her reputation as adulterous and unfaithful—after all, she indeed is a "moste bownteous" lady when it comes to Sir Launcelot.

Though Malory's opinion of Guenevere may seem harsh when expressed through the eyes of the court, his overall judgment of her is surprisingly aligned with Morris's

own conceptions of courtly love. At the beginning of his section "The Knight of the Cart," Malory launches into a spectacular and vibrant description of the month of May, the time of year traditionally associated with Guenevere. He speaks of true love in Arthur's day and ends with a repeal to contemporary readers: "And therefore all ye that be lovers, calle unto youre rememberaunce the monethe of May, lyke as ded queen Gwenyver, for whom I make here a lytyll mencion, that whyle she lyved she was a trew lover, and therefore had a good end" (649). It seems that not even Malory can fully condemn the queen for her actions, in spite of the condemnation of her behavior by some members of the court itself.

Morris's "The Defence of Guenevere" is based on a scene from Malory. In Book XX, Launcelot and Guenevere, having been duly set up by Modred, are at last discovered together. Launcelot miraculously escapes, but Guenevere is thrown at the mercy of the court once again, and this time, in spite of the suddenly sympathetic Gawayne's pleading, King Arthur refuses to give her pardon. As far as he is concerned, she has committed treason, and is therefore condemned to death. The king understands that with proof of his wife's adultery, the whole of his kingdom is lost. Arthur states coldly of his champion and queen, "And therefore for my queene he shall nevermore fyght, for she shall have the law. And if I may gete sir Launcelot, wyte you well he shall have as shameful a dethe" (683).

With no other choice left, Guenevere must face her final judgment and prepares to burn at the stake. In this dramatic moment, her actions are only described as if from a distance, "And so the quene was lad furthe withoute Carlyle, and anone she was dispoled

into her smoke. And than her gostely fadir was brought to her to be shryven of her myssededis. Than was there wepyng and waylynge and wryngyng of hondis" (684). She does not speak, but Malory indicates that as she takes her last rites, the lords and ladies of the court are reduced to tears and misery on her behalf, though few take up arms for her (684).

This scene illustrates the tension of courtly love and society: the court clearly sides with Guenevere, as do many of the knights, but few can support her for that would mean direct treason to the king. This mirrors Guenevere's own double-bind, but with Malory the complication remains unexplored. He moves quickly from the scene of mourning for the queen as she approaches the stake to the arrival of Launcelot, who slaughters all in his sight and swiftly takes Guenevere away to the Joyous Guard. Malory's final comment seems almost comical amidst the action: "Now wyte you well the queen was glad that she was at that tyme ascaped frome the deth, and than she thanked God and sir Launcelot" (684). It seems an understatement, to be sure.

In the very space where the most poignant question surfaces—what is right, the courtly, societal, or the spiritual?—Morris carves out a space for "The Defence of Guenevere." Conjuring up the very same scene *in medias res,* he pauses as Guenevere stands before the lords and ladies of the court, and stretches out time. Launcelot has not yet arrived, and Guenevere has a captive audience. What follows is aptly called her defense, a long discussion of the accusations against her and her beliefs. She does not apologize for her actions, but cites an unfair and impossible lack of choice in the matter. Morris does not launch directly into her dialogue, but filters the scene slightly through the

eyes of an onlooker, presumed to be Gawain, "whose words give us just enough aesthetic distance to admire her beauty and her tactics before the hostile lords" (Stallman 659).

It is through the narrator knight that Morris acknowledges Guenevere's first important power: her beauty. In his descriptions, the queen remains explicitly sensual; he is constantly aware of her body:

> She threw her wet hair back from her brow,
> Her hand close to her mouth touching her cheek;
> As though she had had there a shameful blow...
>
> She much a little touch it; like one lame
> She walked away from Gauwaine, with her head
> Still lifted up; on her cheek of flame (l. 5-9)

The repetition of touching, as well as the red of her cheeks, firmly establishes that this is the Guenevere convention has given us; she is proud and beautiful.

Once she begins to speak, however, it is clear that Morris intends for her to accomplish more than drum up sympathy for Guenevere's cause. From her very first words we understand she is a skilled speaker. She begins by flattering her accusers and while remaining unapologetic:

> "O knights and lords, it seems but little skill
> To talk of well-known things past now and dead.
>
> "God wot I ought to say, I have done ill,
> And pray you all forgiveness heartily!
> Because you must be right, such great lords…" (l. 11-15)

Why talk of things passed, she asks? She does not deny her infidelity, nor does she ignore it. She is deliberately ambiguous in her approach. Echoing the language of Morris's own opening, the *in medias res* of the first line "But knowing now that they would have her speak," Guenevere begins:

> "…still
>
> "Listen, suppose your time were come to die,
> And you were quite alone and very weak;
> Yea, laid a dying while very mightily
>
> "The wind was ruffling up the narrow streak
> Of river through your broad lands running well:
> Suppose a hush should come, then some one speak:
>
> "'One of these cloths is heaven, and one is hell,
> Now choose one cloth for ever; which they be,
> I will not tell you, you must somehow tell…'" (l. 16-24)

The parable that follows presents Guenevere as teacher, while serving to illustrate the impossible conflict and frustration in her situation. She explains that she is given a choice between two cloths, one red and one blue. One represents heaven, and the other hell, but she does not know which cloth signifies which destiny, so her fates lies in the balance between indistinguishable signs. Deciding that blue is the color of heaven, she chooses that cloth, only to find out that it is in fact what will doom her to hell. Though she does not explicitly indicate which cloth represents Arthur and Launcelot, it perfectly illustrates the ambiguity of her situation. Courtly love, the voice of Malory as quoted before, would assert that if one loved well, then she deserves a good end. But society

equates infidelity to Arthur as treason, and Christianity condemns that extra-marital love as a sin. How can these sides be reconciled? How can damnation be prevented? For Guenevere, her failure was inevitable, but her defense is far from over.

As Guenevere continues to speak, she grows in confidence. Morris works to transform Guenevere from the conventional stereotypical queen to an outright orator, surprisingly composed and aware of her audience in spite of a most desperate situation. As Lambdin and Lambdin observe:

> Although the Queen's rhetorical strategy is sometimes annoyingly discursive, Morris probably meant for this to highlight Guenevere's intelligence; each time she alters her argumentative stance, the Queen's keen observation of her audience's reaction is reflected. Guenevere is speaking to the lords of Arthur's kingdom, men she has known for many years, so she changes her style based on their expressions. (79)

Like her husband before her, Guenevere addresses her audience as one of them, catering to their understanding. She is far from helpless. In fact, she is absolutely calculating. She concludes the first section of her argument with a repeated stanza:

> Nevertheless you, O Sir Gauwaine, lie,
> Whatever may have happened through these years,
> God knows I speak truth, saying that you lie. (l 46-48)

This repetition, this accusatory discourse, evokes the wrath of God without outright denying her guilt. She acknowledges her choice has made her fearful of judgment, "and long to die,/ And yet fear much to die for what was sown" (45). She is acting, playing to

the sensibilities of a court well versed in the art of courtly love and sympathetic to the stories and legends circulating among them. As the narrator pulls away to comment, he surveys the reaction of the crowd to her performance. It does indeed read much like a good actress' repertoire:

> Her voice was low at first, being full of tears,
> But as it cleared, it grew full loud and shrill,
> Growing a windy shriek in all men's ears
>
> A ringing in their startled brains, until
> She said that Gauwaine lied, then her voice sunk,
> And her great eyes began to fill
>
> Though still she stood right up, and never shrunk,
> But spoke on bravely, glorious lady fair!
> With passionate twisting of her body there: (l. 49-60)

Her voice and performance are a powerful counterpoint to the language. She is, as Bryden points out, uncomfortable—but her tenuous grasp of the situation translates well from the page as she begins to become more aware of her effect on her accusers (105). Her voice grows both in volume and pitch, becoming "full loud and shrill" until it ultimately becomes a "windy shriek", "a ringing in their startled brains". The men in the audience are not just caught up in her defense, they are caught up in her offence. She displays a kind of unexpected power, using the sound of her voice—the sound of a woman's rhetoric—to sway her audience, to delay her death until the arrival of Launcelot.

The narrator understands Guenevere's vocative power, but predictably pulls away to linger on her body. He comments on her physical presence to represent the conventional perception of Guenevere, whose only power is her sexuality, a facet of the queen Morris does not shy away from. While Morris does not seem interested in disproving this understanding of the Queen, he moves to incorporate it into his treatment as another facet to her defense. The Pre-Raphaelite perception of eroticism is not without precedent, and here Morris adds sexual power to charge the verse and maximize Guenevere's effect on the audience.

As Guenevere continues to speak, she employs a method, known very well to Morris, of the artist's brush. Evoking paintings such as Collier's *Queen Guenevere's Maying*, the next lines are full of descriptions of seasons and of nature, illustrating the strife that came with loving Launcelot.[10] She recounts the trials she endured through the strained years of waiting to act on her love:

> "Christmas and whitened winter passed away,
> And over me the April sunshine came,
> Made very awful with black hail-clouds, yea
>
> "And in the Summer I grew white with flame,
> And bowed my head down: Autumn, and the sick
> Sure knowledge things would never be the same,
>
> "However often Spring might be most thick
> Of blossoms and buds, smote on me, and I grew
> Careless of most things, let the clock tick, tick…" (l. 67-75)

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[10] A more in-depth analysis of the second argument can be found in Lambdin & Lambdin's book *Camelot in the Nineteenth Century*.

Her pining is essential to ally her argument with the courtly love tradition. That the lovers waited to consummate meant that "theirs was no sudden attraction that necessitated immediate or frenzied coupling. The relationship grew more subtly and was not without small obstructions, as Guenevere states in her analogy of slipping into the sea" (Lambdin and Lambdin 81).

Interrupting the discussion on her courtly suffering, Guenevere contrasts Launcelot against Arthur. Her marriage is described in terms of commerce, "I was bought/ By Arthur's great name and his little love" (l. 82-83). She draws a definitive line between the cold, passionless courtship of Arthur, and the vibrant birth of her love of Launcelot. And further, it is no passing fancy. Guenevere, for the sake of her defense, must align herself with something more convincing than passing adultery, and so she casts herself as the perfect, patient, courtly lover.

While the flow of the argument suggests she would move from comparing Launcelot to Arthur to a description of love finally consummated, Guenevere instead pauses a moment. Here, the calculating nature of her performance becomes more obvious as she turns outward, one might say, evoking a gorgeous portrait of her figure on that very day, as in the bloom of spring she was "half mad with beauty" herself (l. 109).

> "A little thing just then had made me mad;
> I dared not think, as I was wont to do,
> Sometimes, upon my beauty; If I had

"Held out my long hand up against the blue,
And, looking on the tenderly darken'd fingers,
Thought that by rights one ought to see quite through,

"There, see you, where the soft still light yet lingers
Round by the edges; what should I have done,
If this had joined with yellow spotted singers,

"And startling green drawn upward by the sun?
But shouting, loosed out, see now! all my hair,
And trancedly stood watching the west wind run (l. 119-129)

All this pomp and circumstance is a clever deception on Guenevere's part. As Lambdin and Lambdin explain:

> Guenevere now loosens her long hair and spreads her arms wide, encouraging the men watching her to feel, as she did on that day, an innocent appreciation of her body and its natural, undeniable, and uncontrollable sensuousness. Just as her audience is enjoying this display of her charms, Guenevere adroitly introduces Launcelot into her garden paradise scene (82).

Innocent though she may have felt on that day, the Guenevere standing before this group of assembled knights and lords is very different from the Guenevere in the garden. This is a queen who has suffered in her own way due to her crimes, suffered shame and embarrassment time and again at the hands of the court. They expect her to be sensuous. And she rises to the occasion, to soften them to her own cause by visually seducing them, even as she is about to be burned to death for her sins.

The introduction of Launcelot is all the more potent, for her rhetoric fireworks have a surprising effect. Waiting to speak of her first kiss with her knight, she turned attention

to her body, no doubt rousing her audience. They then, join in with her frustration, and follow in her elation as she describes Launcelot:

> In that garden fair
>
> "Came Launcelot walking; this is true, the kiss
> Wherewith we kissed in meeting that spring day,
> I scarce dare talk of the remember'd bliss,
>
> "When both our mouths went wandering in one way,
> And aching sorely, met among the leaves;
> Our hands being left behind strained far away.
>
> "Never within a yard of my bright sleeves
> Had Launcelot come before: and now so nigh!
> After that day why is it Guenevere grieves? (l. 132-41)

Morris's Guenevere understands that since she has established herself as a loyal courtly lover, she can confess her love for Launcelot to her audience.

With their presumed sympathy, she lets her accusations fly, challenging Gauwaine to lie once again and endure the consequences of her wrath, which will surely haunt him well after her death:

> "…let me not shout
> For ever after in the winter night
> When you ride out alone! in battle-rout
>
> "Let not my rusting tears make your sword light!
> Ah! God of mercy, how he turns away!
> So, ever must I dress me to the fight…" (l. 160-65)

The tactic works, and Gauwaine turns from her, bowing under the weight of her attack. Guenevere continues with a description of another of her trials, after her accusation by Mellyagraunce. She is collected now, sure of herself; she has been in a similar situation and acquitted. But to lend more power to her voice is no longer now as important as her body, because that is what will garner the most attention from her audience. Lambdin and Lambdin call this moment a "dizzying array of rhetoric" as she "alters the subject once more by flaunting her most effective weapon: her own body" (85). Now as both lover and warrior, she prepares to do battle fully armed, both with beauty and rhetoric.

Guenevere now deliberately draws attention to her most erotic qualities: "…see my breast rise,/ Like waves of purpose sea, as here I stand;/ And how my arms are moved in wonderful wise" (l. 216-218). She outright dares them to judge her, employing typical medieval rhetoric, that "physical beauty reflects spiritual goodness" (Lambdin and Lambdin page?). Further, Guenevere insists that Launcelot was in her chamber simply to comfort her, and at her order. Certainly, this is not entirely a lie—she most certainly asked him there, after all—but it does not reveal an all-out truth. As she slips further in her argument, and as she realizes the control she has on her audience, she becomes more liberal with her coloring. She challenges them to deny her beauty, for medieval convention states if they cannot deny her beauty, they must accept her innocence.

For her final argument, Guenevere revisits the night of Launcelot's and her discovery. But before she can finish, she interrupts herself, just as the hoofbeats of

Launcelot's horse begin to echo in the distance. As she stops, the narrator again picks up the action of the scene, comparing her to "a man who hears/ His brother's trumpet sounding through the wood/ Of his foes' lances" (l.279-280). How peculiar that the narrator, presumably as drawn into the queen's discourse as the rest—knowing full well that it must be Launcelot once more coming to save his love—utilizes a masculine description of a brother in war. He effectively transforms Guenevere in those last lines to a warrior herself, now a man with a weapon in both hands standing at the ready against the oncoming attack, a formidable foe: a Knight of Love.

As Lambdin and Lambdin demonstrate, Morris abruptly cuts off the poem before the slaughter found in Malory. However, this decision is essential to a reading of both the poem and its protagonist (87).

> We are able, at least temporarily, to believe in the omnipotence of love. While we may not completely pardon the lovers, Guenevere's plea allows us to commiserate enough to be pleased that her passion will not cause her death. Morris created a powerful figure who seems somehow beyond conventional morality. (87)

With the conclusion to the poem, it appears that both Guenvere and courtly love have won out. She is rescued and saved from the flame, given what we presume to be "a good end" because of her adherence to the laws of courtly love.

Her first battle won in the name of Love, Guenevere ultimately vanishes at the end of the poem, and this is problematic. For as impressive as her rhetoric remains, she still must depend on Launcelot for ultimate salvation. Having discovered her ability to fight with her words, tempered with her own beauty, still her agency is diminished in the wake

of the appearing knight, who arrives like an angel from heaven. To truly achieve agency and reconcile the tensions of courtly love and its religious counterpart, Guenevere must disengage herself entirely from triangle. As Morris demonstrates in the second poem from *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, "King Arthur's Tomb," the price is high, but the reward is truly "a good end."

Like "The Defence of Guenevere," "King Arthur's Tomb" takes its setting directly from a passage in *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Malory relates that once Guenevere heard of Arthur's death, she abruptly retreated to a nunnery in Almsbury:

> And there she lete make herself a nunne, and wered whyght clothys and blak, and grete penaunce she toke upon her, as ever ded synfull woman in thys londe. And never creature could make her myry, but ever she lyved in fastynge, prayers, and almes-dedis, that all maner of people marvayled how vertuously she was changed. (Vinaver 717-18)

The once richly arrayed queen is cast in the grisaille garb of a nun. Launcelot, then unaware of Arthur's passing, learns of the king's death and makes his way to his tomb at Almsbury. He is brought before the queen and subject to a long, derisive speech on the sin of their relationship, as Guenevere declares: "for thorow oure love that we have loved togydir ys my most noble lorde slayne" (Vinaver 720). Launcelot swears to change his life and become a monk, but Guenevere does not believe him. Ultimately, there is much swooning, and Launcelot retreats into the wood, depressed and weeping, to find solace at a chapel and "there he put an habyte… And there he servyed God day and nyght with prayers and fastynges."

But Morris's treatment of this final meeting between Guenevere and Launcelot, as they come together at the tomb of King Arthur, differs significantly. The premise is ultimately the same, though Almsbury is transformed to Glastonbury. The poem commences removed from Guenevere, in the mind of Launcelot as he travels toward Glastonbury in search of his love. The jarring *in medias res* of "The Defence" is absent. Instead of concentrating solely on Guenevere, the opening is concerned with Launcelot, and his rather befuddled state as a waylaid lover on his way to love.

> Hot August noon: already on that day
> Since sunrise through the Wiltshire downs, most sad
> Of mouth and eye, he had gone leagues of way;
> Ay and by night, till whether good or bad
>
> He was, he knew not, though he knew perchance
> That he was Launcelot, the bravest knight
> Of all who since the world was, have borne lance,
> Or swung their swords in wrong cause or in right.
>
> Nay, he knew nothing now, except that where
> The Glastonbury gilded towers shine,
> A lady dwelt, whose name was Guenevere; (l. 1-11)

Launcelot is transformed into the courtly ideal; the abbey is suddenly a castle, with "gilded towers." This undercurrent of courtly language is picked up from Malory who, in spite of being harangued by Guenevere, continues to respond to her "in his old way" (Lambdin and Lambdin 91). Launcelot seems painfully unaware that time has passed and that Guenevere, within, is anything but how he remembers her. As Bryden explains, the construction of character in "King Arthur's Tomb" is by and large an assemblage of

memories, "glimpses of what they remember, what they say about each other and what others have said about them" (107). This narrative choice puts the characters at an immediate distance to the reader, as if they are watered down versions of themselves.

Morris explores the problem with Launcelot's courtly character immediately. The opening of the poems indeed keeps a distance from the characters; Launcelot certainly seems detached. He knows he is "perchance" Launcelot, and begins to recall Guenevere as he had known her in his youth. In high courtly fashion, she is a vision of perfection, and he conjures up her image through his own words—he sees her in great detail, a striking picture of beauty and sensuality. But his memories are not purely good. Something is amiss, as if the world itself has gone on, and Launcelot's delusions of courtly perfection cannot stand. Launcelot's language is replete with contradictions, frequently moving from depictions of color and life, to lifelessness[11]. Recounting a night where she slept upon his breast, he explains, "I almost died/ In those night-watches with my love and dread" (l. 66).

The strange mood Launcelot creates is, as Robert L. Stallman explains, "desolate" (667). Stallman continues:

> The kingdom is in ruins because of his love, and yet stolid Launcelot continues single-mindedly to make it the center of his world. The characterization is purposely aimed at creating Launcelot as an anachronism, the knight of the Round Table, the Courtly Lover, the most Chivalrous of knights, but all in all, a man who does not

[11] The use of color in Morris has been well discussed among the critics, but does not pertain to the scope of this paper. See "The Deep Still Land of Colors" Color Imagery in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems"* by Josephine Koster Tarvers.

> understand the intricacies of love and guilt, a man caught dazedly in a dream from which he seems unable to wake. (667)

Launcelot personifies the impossibility of courtly love. In spite of Arthur's death, in spite of the trials and tribulations, he remains stolid to the end, unmoving in his approach.

Ironically, the right of the courtly lover to love is the precise stance Guenevere fought to keep in "The Defence of Guenevere" but one that Morris now shows to be faulty. For in a world such as this, even the greatest lover cannot stand against the ravages of time and the complexities of human psyche. Arthur is dead, and Arthur was the catalyst that brought the two lovers together. Arthur was the center of their world, even if they were unaware of it; without him, courtly love cannot exist. In a way, the stable, wise king, set the stage for their courtly love to flourish, and in his absence it crumples away. It was simply the misfortune of Guenvere and Launcelot to have fallen in love, for they were judged differently.

As the poem continues on, Launcelot ruminates further, but the memories are "not so sweet" as he continues through the night (l. 105). The dark robs him of cheer, taunting him with memories, always "shadowy slipping from his grasp" (l. 107). Only when the sun returns,and Glastonbury is in sights, does he stir from his melancholy. A perpetually stalwart courtly lover, Lancelot ir reminded by the rising of the sun reminds of his lady; and he comforts himself with memories of her body—he remembers her entwined in his arms, spent and exhausted, her hair spilled out on the rushes, a picture of loveliness. The knight then rests his head on a tomb at the abbey—Arthur's, though he does not realize it.

Guenevere materializes in the middle of the stanza, and the narrative abruptly shifts from Launcelot to her again.

> Dazed there he laid his head upon a tomb,
> Not knowing it was Arthur's, at which sight
> One of her maidens told her, "He is come,"
> And she went forth to meet him; yet a blight
>
> Had settled on her, all her robes were black,
> With a long white veil only; she went slow,
> As one walks to be slain, her eyes did lack
> Half her old glory, yea, alas! (l. 131-138)

This turn in the narrative is a bit unsteady. Launcelot is not aware of her approach; she comes like the advancing night. Recalling "The Defence", Morris describes her movement as "one walks to be slain"—she is again walking to judgment, but this time, not at the hands of her peers, but at the hand of God.

Instead of continuing on in a linear fashion, Morris flashes back to the previous night, in direct contrast to Launcelot's recent journey. Where Launcelot had been haunted by memories in the night, Guenevere is comforted by them—or at least, she indulges in them. She waits and thinks on the very scene which so recently roused Launcelot out of his dreary mood:

> …until that Launcelot's head
> Should lie on her breast, with all her golden hair
> Each side: when suddenly the thing grew drear
> In morning twilight… (l. 146-149)

It is the morning that reveals her transgressions, turning her joy into darkeness, bringing to light her "lumps of sin"—a cancerous, horrifying image of her guilt. Unlike Launcelot, she cannot continue in giddiness. In fact, her reaction to her memories of Launcelot result in a display of violence against herself:

> After, a spasm took
> Her face, and all her frame, she caught her hair,
> All her hair, in both hands, terribly she shook,
>
> And rose till she was sitting in the bed,
> Set her teeth hard, and shut her eyes and seem'd
> As though she would have torn it from her head,
> Natheless she dropp'd it, lay down, as she deem'd
>
> It matter'd not whatever she might do: (l. 145—53)

Guenevere's hair, a courtly symbol so often alluded to, becomes a focus of her fury—she tries to rip it from her very skull, as if the previous memory of her hair strewn abut Launcelot's chest after laying with him leaves a mark on her still. It is a direct rebellion against her courtly self, to destroy the very memory of her sensuality, to repudiate her own beauty.

Though not as impressive as her defense in the previous poem, the prayer that follows represents the specific moment of Guenevere's final choice. Her indulgences with Launcelot represent her younger self, her self inextricably tied up between Arthur and the court: Guenevere the lover. She is, in the words of Robert L. Stallman, "the brains of the outfit" in comparison the Launcelot as "she…will come to understand the

nature of love and will have to take the action that Launcelot cannot take because of his stubborn moral blindness" (667). Moral blindness is precisely the last thing one could accuse of Guenevere. She appears in "King Arthur's Tomb" doubly aware of her transgressions, both as a mourning wife and a reformed adulteress. The law of courtly love is no longer governs her; it has only caused her pain and suffering, separation from her love and from her husband. The cancer of her guilt has caused her to waste away, but there is one final escape. The Guenevere of "King Arthur's Tomb" is a direct progression from the younger version in "The Defence." Her first battle, at the stake, was won in the name of courtly love. But, with the death of Arthur, Guenevere's realizes she can no longer escape. Launcelot cannot save her. Only God can. In the midst of her fitful evening, waiting for Launcelot to arrive, as she fights with her lustful nature, she is granted grace by God (l. 156).

As Morris did before in the "The Defence of Guenevere" so he does once more with Guenevere in "Tomb"—he juxtaposes her beauty with the power of her voice. When Guenevere speaks for the first time in "Tomb", however, she is no longer the rhetorician. Instead, Morris cleverly strips away the public feel of her speech. She is alone, with only God, after her night's difficulties; though she may be in a state of grace, however, the experience has clearly left her in turmoil. Her "plea for forgiveness from God echoes her words in 'The Defence' when she demanded that the lords appreciate her physical attractiveness" (Lambdin and Lambdin 89). As earlier in the poem, Launcelot compares her to Mary, so does Guenevere ask God: "Dost thou reck/ That I am beautiful, Lord,

even as you/ And your dear Mother?" (l. 168-70). But now, the beauty seems no longer courtly as Guenevere begins to turn inward, striving to achieve inner spiritual purity.

Beauty aside, it is Guenevere's language that becomes most striking in her prayer to God. As Lambdin and Lamdbin discuss, "in her confusion, Guenevere thinks of Christ and Launcelot as rival lovers" (89). This moment of confusion is a direct demonstration of Morris's exploration of the courtly and Christian. For a moment, it looks as if she will simply replace Launcelot with Christ. To reconcile this, she loses all pretense, and unleashes a disturbing, stream-of-consciousness rant as she attempts to solidify her place not just on earth, but in heaven also, recalling the parable of the two cloths from "The Defence of Guenvere":

> "If even I go to hell, I cannot choose
> But love you, Christ, yea, though I cannot keep
> From loving Launcelot; O Christ! must I lose
> My own heart's love? see, though I cannot weep,
>
> "Yet am I very sorry for my sin;
> Moreover, Christ, I cannot bear that hell,
> I am most fain to love you, and to win
> A place in heaven some time: I cannot tell:
>
> "Speak to me, Christ! I kiss, kiss, kiss your feet;
> Ah! now I weep!" The maid said, "By the tomb
> He waiteth for you, lady," coming fleet,
> Not knowing what woe filled up all the room. (l. 172-84)

She must, by her own admission, not just replace but choose Christ over Launcelot, even if in doing so she loses her "own heart's love". To choose Christ, to be given a second chance, she must refute courtly love conventions entirely. In what Lambdin and

Lambdin recognize as a Magdalen gesture, Guenevere kisses the floor as if kissing Christ's feet, sealing her pact and accepting grace (90). Although this is an act of submission on the face of it, this moment prepares Guenevere for her meeting with Launcelot. Her guilt over her sins and her fear of hell have overridden her desire for Launcelot, and at last Guenevere has made a choice all of her own.

Just at the moment of her submission, Guenevere is interrupted by one of her maids who bears the announcement of Launcelot's arrival. The timing is officious, as "had Launcelot arrived one day earlier, he might have found his queen's feelings for him unaltered" (Lambdin and Lambdin 89). But as it stands, Guenevere has undergone her own transformation as

> …now her self-absorption is engulfed in her perception of a new kind of beauty, the beauty of Christian grace which is represented in her mind by her own beauty. The connection is not an unusual one for Morris's medieval world: the beauty of woman forecasts the beauty of the Virgin; the beauty of the earthly garden shadows forth Paradise. (Stallman 667)

Arthur's great error, mistaking her outward beauty for spiritual purity, is proved—at this late date—not so far from the mark. When pressed to it, Guenevere assents to this assumption by repudiating her previous life and desires and submitting wholly to God.

That is not to say the going is easy. Guenevere, newly repented, is immediately tempted by Launcelot, who cannot shake the conventions of courtly love nor understand that the world—and therefore the people in it—have drastically changed. She greets him not as a lover, but as a nun, praising his gesture of grief, masking any hint of emotion

with her voice and tone: “Well done! To pray/ For Arthur, my dear Lord, the greatest king/ That ever lived” (l. 188-90). Launcelot, who recognizes her presence as her golden hair falls like a curtain over the tomb, is horrified at her benign greeting.

> "Guenevere! Guenevere!
> Do you not know me, are you gone mad? fling
> Your arms and hair about me, lest I fear
>
> "You are not Guenevere, but some other thing." (l 190-93)

Launcelot’s first words to her are telling. Not only does he exclaim her name in sudden angst, but he immediately commands her to do his bidding, as if her simple act of loving him is all that is needed to assure her existence. If she cannot love him, she is simply, “some other thing”. Launcelot cannot comprehend the shocking shift—and blatant dismissal of ideal chivalric love—that has occurred. He simply reckons she must be “either insane or an imposter” (Lambdin and Lambdin 91). By not acting her part, by removing herself from Launcelot’s expectations and refusing to return his affections, she effectively draws a line in the sand, and reiterates—both to the reader and herself—that she has made her decision. This agency is certainly more definitive from the version displayed in “The Defence of Guenevere,” for it was reliant then on Launcelot’s presence. Knowing now the power she can wield through her words and her own actions, Guenevere’s transformation is complete.

Guenevere is adamant, after such a harrowing evening with her God, that she has made her choice. She is allied now with God, and, one might argue, with Arthur, in order

to establish herself apart from Launcelot and as a free agent and to save his soul. In spite of her assurances to Launcelot that she is not mad, but ill, the knight continues on, speaking over her:

> "Yea, she is mad: thy heavy law, O Lord,
> Is very tight about her now, and grips
> Her poor heart, so that no right word
>
> "Can reach her mouth; so, Lord, forgive her now,
> That she not knowing what she does, being mad,
> Kills me in this way: Guenevere, bend low
> And kiss me once! for God's love kiss me! sad
>
> "Though your face is, you look much kinder now;
> Yea once, once for the last time kiss me, lest I die." (l. 198-205)

Launcelot, unknowingly, thick-headed as he is, walks directly into a trap. His words do not soothe or persuade Guenevere; rather, they only serve to enrage her and to equip her with her most powerful weapon: her words. After all, no one on the earth understands stalwart Launcelot as she. As Stallman elaborates, "She knows Launcelot so well, knows how and where to strike in order to kill his mistaken perception, calls him dishonorable and traitor while he reels dazedly beneath her strokes, the conqueror felled at last" (668). Her attack is relentless, drawn directly from Malory's precedent, and illustrates the newfound passion in Guenevere's life: God.

This agency and verbal dominance over Launcelot does, as Stallman notes, seem initially a reaction to her sin against Arthur (668). But there is something else moving the her to action, "…knowing how perceptive and intelligent the queen is, we can hardly

construe her words as anything but an attempt to save her lover for heaven in spite of his own moral obtuseness" (668). With one short prayer to God, "Christ! my hot lips are very near his brow,/ Help me to save his soul!" she goes to battle against the courtly lover now transformed into a Warrior of God, armed with words and memory. Unlike Malory, where her speech "seems more like a public denunciation of Launcelot's love than an attempt to save his soul" she is genuine.

Guenevere does not seek to deny her affections for Launcelot, though he accuses her of lying with her version of the story, but rather to show Launcelot the dark underbelly of the repercussions of courtly love. The victory is hard won, though, as Launcelot still attempts to win her over, long after her catalogue of misdeeds and sins at court finishes. This brings about a self-conscious aside: "He thinks me mad already, O bad! bad!/ Let me lie down a little while and wail" (l. 162-63). Finally, Launcelot shifts his argument: if he should kill her, at least they could be reunited in heaven. Guenevere's momentary weakness and need for rest is restored at his request. She launches into some of the most stunning language of the poem and goes in for the kill:

> "Banner, and sword, and shield, you dare not die,
> Lest you meet Arthur in the other world,
> And, knowing who you are, he pass you by,
> Taking short turns that he may watch you curl'd,
>
> "Body and face and limbs in agony,
> Lest he weep presently and go away,
> Saying: 'I loved him once,' with a sad sigh,
> Now I have slain him, Lord, let me go too, I pray.
> [Launcelot falls. (l. 379-386)

She evokes the wrath of not only God, but of Arthur too, playing to Launcelot's guilt and comparing the two. He can no longer sustain himself in her presence, she has become too great a power for him. Stallman describes this attack as "the most unkindest cut of all" as she "compares him invidually with his King, rival, and victim" (668). The line between God is indeed blurred, as it is "Arthur who transcends the earthly strife of the lovers" (Bryden 108).

As the poem concludes, Stallman notes "Guenevere has been successful once more, for the symbols of a religious conversion, the stigmatic wounds and the sacring bell, appear to her dazed lover as he symbolically wakens to a new perception" (669). As before, Guenevere uses the art of the argument, and the gift of her own voice, to escape from a seemingly impossible situation for anyone, let alone the adulterous queen of Arthur. She symbolically kills the courtly Launcelot, winning him for Christ, and conveniently does away with the temptation to fall back into the romantic ideal.

Through Guenevere, Morris indeed brings us "disturbingly close" to the tensions Malory only grazes in *Le Morte D'Arthur*. He eradicates courtly tendencies altogether, opting for ambiguity instead of closure. A more traditional piece might, as Stallman notes, have "romantic lovers would die as Launcelot suggested, and perhaps a twined briar and rose would grow from their twin graves, but Guenevere is too wise to settle for that. Her despair and subsequent grace are brought on through her own introspection" (669). Morris is both derisive of Launcelot's adherence to the courtly ideal and distant from Guenevere. What maintains of Guenevere's agency, as uncomfortable as the religious setting may be, is just Stallman's point exactly—her decision to refuse

Launcelot, and courtly conventions, comes of her own volition entirely. Morris's portrayal is more an observation of a performance, rather than a psychological profile, but no less effective

Just as in "The Defence", Morris utilizes Guenevere to illustrate his "own ideas and concerns, which, in this case, develop around the fine line between human love in its highest form and the same love as it dissolves into sin" (Lambdin and Lambdin 74). As Morris was inspired by the violence and ambiguity of Malory, so he too imparts a similar feeling in his treatment. In "The Defence of Guenevere" Morris refutes society's judgment of Guenevere through the logic of courtly love; in "King Arthur's Tomb" he destroys the laws of courtly love through the act of conversion and repentance, freeing sins which directly led to the guilt and shame of the queen. That were are left with questions is no oversight on the poet's part. He is deliberately ambivalent. If Guenevere achieves her own agency at the end of "King Arthur's Tomb" by refuting courtly tradition with the power of her own logic and rhetoric, she does this in the only way available to her: the harlot now becomes a saint and subsumes her outer beauty in inner beauty.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

Though some one thousand years have passed since the character of Guenevere first appeared, little remains certain. From story to story, author to author, she changes and shifts, impossible to define. But what does emerge, after much exploration, is common fascination with the Queen of Camelot. Her appearance in the Arthurian cycle represents its demise and its contradictions: she is a queen, a lover, a subject, and a woman. Unable to balance the courtly, chivalric, and Christian laws, Guenevere's character is in constant strain throughout subsequent retellings. Sometimes she is portrayed as the courtly ideal; other times, she appears as a demonized harlot meant to caution women against the sins of the flesh.

With so many takes on her story, there can be no definitive Guenevere; but her tale remains a remarkable illustration of the impossible contradictions and tensions inherent in the Arthurian cycle. She represents a woman striving for agency in a man's world, one who abides by the laws of the heart but cannot keep the laws of society or of God. When the realm she knows so well is destroyed, and chivalry and courtly love with it, she finds agency by ridding herself of all earthly power and taking on the mantle of an abbess, revoking the outward beauty which defined and corrupted her, for an inner beauty that purified her, reborn.

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